Castlemaine Naturalist

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John Landy presents the Natural History Medal to Ern Perkins photo George Broadway

Honour for Ern Perkins

The Australian Natural History Medal was presented to Ern Perkins at a special gathering at the headquarters of the Victorian Field Naturalists in Blackburn on Wednesday evening, March 11. Former Governor and highly respected part-time local resident John Landy took time from his onerous schedule of administering bushfire appeal funds to make the presentation to Ern, before rushing off to attend one of the many meetings of the fire appeal fund distribution.

After the presentation Ern gave a talk, illustrated by his own photographs, in which he described the changes which he has observed in the Box-Ironbark forests since moving here in 1975. It often amazes me how Ern had taken photographs of scenery back in the early years with uncanny foresight which he can now compare with recent photographs to illustrate the changes which have taken place. One of his key points was the importance of doing just that in order to have a clearer idea of what has happened over the years, as memories fade, and changes occur almost imperceptibly. Members will remember how Ern was the instigator and driving force behind the effort to document the landscape a few years ago, which was titled "Photo-Points". Photographs were taken at key sites which were meticulously documented so that they could be retaken at a later time. Information required may include a particular landmark, or a GPS reading, and the specific direction in which the photograph was taken. Ern has many photographs which illustrate the changes which have occurred in the landscape as trees have grown or died and understory shrubs have mostly died or been eaten by starving animals. Many of his photographs reveal the sad state of our forests compared to their condition in earlier wetter years.

Ern and Lesley have also for several years continued to make observations for the Australian Bird Atlas, and still do so. There are several sites around Castlemaine which they visit still on a regular basis with total visits to a site nudging up to a hundred. With the data collected, Ern has produced graphs and charts which trace the fortunes of particular bird species, showing which have flourished, and sadly the many which are in decline. All this collection and organization of data represents many many hours of painstaking effort. Such an undertaking could only have been contemplated by either a bachelor, or a man possessed of a most understanding wife. However, Lesley is not merely a long suffering wife who waits around at home waiting for Ern to return, but is a true partner, making a major contribution to the family team. She too is a knowledgeable botanist but is also a very competent bird observer, complementing Ern's botanical expertise. Together they form a formidable team. There is no doubt in my mind that Lesley too deserves a medal for her contribution

Ern's name has been added to the list of many illustrious names of those who are former recipients of the ANH Medal. Names which include:- Alec Chisholm, Crosbie Morrison, Jim Willis, Winifred Waddell, Ros Garnet, Cliff Beauglehole, Fred Rogers, Rodger Elliot and Dr Malcolm Calder. It should be noted that this is a national award which is administered by the FNCV, but the organising committee has representatives from a variety of organizations.

We might well feel proud that one of our local residents and a founding member of our club has been judged worthy of being added to such a distinguished list.

George Broadway

Of Recently Released Regents

Chris Morris

HL. White of Belltrees, NSW, wrote in 1909 of the Warty-faced Honeyeaters that were plentiful in winter in the area, to the point that they were there in thousands and in riding through the bush their peculiar note was heard all day long.

The Warty-Faced Honeyeater is better known these days as the Regent Honeyeater and sadly the scene described by Henty White is an event of the past. Nowadays there are barely 2000 Regent Honeyeaters left, but the release of captive-bred birds in 2008 in the Chiltem National Park holds out some hope as a way of supplementing the wild population and I went along last year to hear how it was done.

It is important to understand how a bird went from common to the point that re-introduction became necessary if it is to survive. Regent Honeyeaters are birds of the woodlands, in our case birds of the Box-Ironbark forests, turned into productive agricultural land. This loss of habitat led to the rapid decline of the species, becoming extinct firstly in South Australia then Queensland.

In the 1990's a recovery plan was written and a recovery team formed. Early in the program it was determined that that Regents were declining at such a rate, that to ensure against extinction a captive colony needed to be established and a breeding program introduced. Birds were collected as nestlings or eggs from Chiltem and breeding began at Taronga Zoo. In time the captive population increased to 50 birds leading to the plan for a captive release (later reduced to 28 birds). Chiltem was chosen as it is where the species most regularly occurs and the knowledge that wild birds had attempted to breed there in 2006. Releasing captive-bred birds like Regent Honeyeaters is not easy. They are dependent on good nectar flows and well known for traveling large distances to seek better resources.

Each bird was fitted with a unique combination of colour bands and the new release was to have a mix of first year and older birds with an even number of males and females. Furthermore there were to be two release groups, and the second group would only be released if the first group were coping well. And finally two different methods of attaching radio-transmitters were to be used. The number of birds to be released and radio-tracked meant that volunteers had to be recruited and trained to monitor the birds. Getting people involved was the easy part; despite the daunting task of reading colour bands and remembering the abbreviation codes for colours.

Getting the systems in place prior to release of the captive-raised birds came next. The excitement came in April 2008 when 27 captive-bred Regent Honeyeaters were released in Chiltem-Mt Pilot National Park. After spending a month in quarantine they were flown to Albury and driven to the Park and housed in temporary holding aviaries until released. To all accounts the birds behaved as though they had been in the wild forever with some foraging within minutes and others probing under bark for insects. For over two months these birds fitted with radio transmitters were tracked by a dedicated band of volunteers to determine whether they would survive. Two months after release 20 birds were being seen on a regular basis. Evidence of pair bonding and nest-building has been observed so we might see expect to see wild chicks raised by captive bred adults.

Life History of a Diurnal Lepidopterist

Tony Morton

It was wartime, 1943. My father worked for the Indian Civil Service in Delhi. Aged eight, I was sent to boarding school in Simla, at B.C.S. (Bishop Cotton's School otherwise known as Best Cooked Sausages). Simla lies at some 7,000 feet in the Himalayas, and because of the long, snowy winter we had a three month holiday then and two ten-day holidays separating the three terms. There was a large buddleia bush at the edge of the sports field, and several of us would swipe away with our nets at the wonderful variety of butterflies that came along in plenty. I've still got a few in one of my cases, finally mounted after following me around in a cigar box for forty years!

We had our own names for them, the 'Peacock Monal' *(Papilio paris)* was a prize, as were the other Swallowtails *(polyctor, krishna, palinurus)*, which we called Monals indiscriminately. My father told me that Monal was the vernacular name for the Himalayan Pheasant, which also has a magnificent iridescent blue and green plumage. Then there were the 'Rice Monals', *(P. polytes,* perhaps) called this because of the white spots along the termens of the wings, shaped like grains of rice. Others were just 'Riceys'. I imagine these must have been various *Euploeas.* We called *P. demoleus* the 'Cornflower', *Cyrestis thyodamus* the 'Mappy', *Junonia orithya* the 'Lady's Fancy', *J. hierta* the 'Gentleman's Fancy', *Kaninska canace* the 'Blue Admiral'. There were also many Little Brown Jobs (probably *Ypthimas*) we saw on walks. We called them 'Hoppys' and believed they were a sign of rain coming! I'm ashamed to say we took no notice of the Blues and Skippers (which are of such great interest to me now), considering them of no use to man nor beast!

Some of us kept large beetles, Stag, Rhinoceros, Hercules, in our pockets, happily sucking on a quarter of apple, making a contented buzzing sound (the beetles, not us!). We would put them on the table and try to make them 'fight'. They would lumber towards each other, often missing their opponent but sometimes colliding. When they did, it was usually the Rhino that would 'win'. His frontal 'horn' could tip the opposing beetle over on its back. A cheer would go up.

Then it would be supper time. We sat in tables of eight. The 'bearers' always impressed me enormously. They would be loaded up with eight full plates, four on each arm, and serve the whole table by shrugging each pair down their arms until the last pair was in their hands! I don't remember one plate ever being dropped. I longed to be a bearer when I grew up.

During one ten day holiday I stayed with my mother in a Simla hotel. My father couldn't get away from Delhi because of work. I met a delightful man who I later realized was a real collector, but of moths. His room smelt splendidly scientific for it was also his laboratory. He was breeding moths in cages. We went out after nightfall and walked round the streets of Simla seeing what moths had been attracted to streetlights. He gave me the cocoon of an Indian Moon Moth. I kept it in a box for a long time. Eventually the moth emerged and the most beautiful thing it was, pale green with pinkish veining and astonishingly long, delicate tails.

Then we went back to England where I found things very dull by comparison, though I do remember a wonderful flight of Clouded Yellows *(Colias croceus)* in autumn 1947, I think. Cricket and football were now claiming my attention. They seemed important to me then, though now I feel my spare time could have been far better spent studying Natural History! Besides, instead of playing Army cricket in Hong Kong, where I was doing National Service, I could have been sitting at the feet of Colonel J. N. Eliot, specialist in the *Lycaenidae*, who was serving there too in 1955. I only discovered this years later. It was also years later that I found out that I had spent a year in Switzerland almost next door to Vladimir Nabokov, novelist and taxonomist, particularly expert on Alpine butterflies. He was living in a Montreux hotel at the time, 1966. I was teaching at a school nearby wasting time again coaching various sports instead of getting to know Nabokov who by then, I believe, only had time for, and was only civil to, other butterfly collectors!

But all was not lost! In 1969 I came to Melbourne and though Victoria has only about 100 species of butterfly, and the whole of Australia only about 400 (compare this with the island of Singapore which has (alas, now, had?) 1200 species at least!), I found a lot of my old friends from the buddleia bush in Simla here, especially in North Queensland, and have been very interested in them ever since.

Richard Hughes – The Wild Country project

Noel Young

Victoria is the most cleared State in Australia, and faces an extinction crisis, with 44% of our native plants and 30% of our wildlife extinct or threatened. In the face of climate change, the challenge to arrest this trend is obviously huge, and it is necessary to think big to achieve results.

The Wilderness Society has initiated a Wild Country campaign to cover several vulnerable areas in Australia, including the Kimberlies, Cape York, and the "tri-state" region covering remnant vegetation in a large part of Western Victoria, spilling across to SE SA, and NSW. This area was the subject of Richard Hughes' address to the March meeting.

The "Great Southern Sanctuary" is an ambitious program to protect and restore nature in this area. Representatives of the controlling bodies of land and other stakeholders involved hold meetings to sort out a plan of action around the project aims.

Broadly these aims are

- to protect the Cobboboonee forests in the south and red gum wetlands and mallee woodlands in the north,
- to collaborate with Greening Australia's "Habitat 141" replanting program to create wildlife corridors between the National Parks,

- to prevent both logging from red gum forests and the spread of exotic weeds, and
- lobby government to implement bushfire management and restore environmental flows to rivers.

To assess the problems in the total area, information is gathered from a wide range of sources. Ecological factors and processes need to be understood. Remote sensing methods are now commonly used to map changes on a broad scale. By way of example Richard showed Modis satellite mapping recording new plant growth – monthly changes could be clearly seen after heavy rain in North Queensland sent water down the feeder watercourses towards Lake Eyre.

The satellite based maps of remnant "native" blocks of land clearly showed how much natural habitat has been destroyed in the past, which together with other factors like feral animals, has caused the retraction of range of species like the Grey Crowned Babbler and the Regent Honeyeater.

To re-establish a viable ecosystem over such a region, biolinks are being established by replanting areas with native vegetation. To the core areas, links and buffer zones need to be added to give wildlife room to migrate, and thus a better chance to survive climate change. Funding for repurchase and re-vegetation of private land for corridors is partly by industries and businesses, and with the inducement of carbon offsets increasing in importance, recovery of substantial areas is becoming viable

Black Saturday Refuge

Nigel Harland

On February 7th Anne and I made all our preparations for the predicted hot day early in the morning. We then sat indoors in a state of agitation, hoping that nothing would happen in our part of the world. A few days earlier we had bought a small birdbath which we had put on the veranda, outside the window on the southern side of the house. The spot was chosen so that we could see any activity from our normal chairs in the lounge room. Up to that point we hadn't seen anything taking advantage of it – we have several water sources in the garden. As the day wore on and the temperature increased we saw a bit of activity, one or two of the resident White-browed Scrubwrens hopped along under the birdbath and flew up into the shrubs just beyond it – seemingly having a bit of a look into it. Apart from the water, there was a small rock in the middle which I had put there the day before.

Then a Yellow-faced Honeyeater landed on the edge of the birdbath and

flew off before drinking. Then a Spotted Pardalote came and perched on the rock. After a while he (or she) had the first drink before flying off, having been interrupted by more Yellow-faced Honeyeaters. A Crimson Rosella walked along the veranda underneath the birdbath. The Yellow-faced Honeyeaters became more common and less inhibited. Then a White-naped Honeyeater appeared and headed straight for a drink. A Grey Shrikethrush sat on the decking, but decided not to drink. A White-plumed Honeyeater appeared and headed straight for the water, pushing the more numerous Yellow-faced Honeyeaters away. There followed a White-faced Honeyeater who didn't seem to mind who was there at the same time.

Then the Crimson Rosella returned and sat on the decking for quite a while. Meanwhile the smaller birds were becoming more adventurous and much more numerous. Then the Rosella jumped from the decking onto the rock in the middle of the birdbath, scattering all the others. He sat there in sole possession for quite some time, dipping his beak from time to time. Gradually, the Yellow-faced Honeyeaters came back and perched on the edges of the birdbath. Eventually we had 13 Yellow-faced Honeyeaters sitting around the edge, while the Crimson Rosella sat on the rock in the middle! I wish I'd had my camera, but it was in for repairs!

We had to fill up the birdbath once or twice, but the birds provided us with plenty of distraction from what was going on outside. The nearest fire was near to Redesdale – some 20km from us and the wind was blowing it further away.

We have kept the birdbath full ever since and we get many visitors, but never as many as on that day.

Observations

- White naped and Brown headed Honeyeaters have not returned since February 7th ; a group of about 15 Common Bronzewings seen; and a dead Grey Kangaroo joey found with missing tail – Denis Hurley
- A Silver Gull seen at Lake Joanna; and recently a Mistletoe Bird at the bird bath – Natalie de Maccus
- Flock of about 30 Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos at Chewton recently – Nigel Harland
- A male Blue faced Honeyeater seen in the neighboring yard; a pair of Mudlarks (first visit in five years); and Weeping Cassinia coming into bud - Rita Mills

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme
April 2009

Fri April 3* meeting: JULIAN HOLLIS on "Climate Change from the Geological Point of View"
Sat April 4* field trip: Some features in the Daylesford area – Leader Julian Hollis **[NB: Departure time 11.30 am from Duke St]**

Fri May 8th meeting: DAVID HOLLANDS on Owls and other night birds
Sat May 9th field trip: Tarren Valley area

*** Note change of date** - April 10 is Easter Friday

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.
Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.
Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Natalies; 65 Johnstone Street, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Subscriptions for 2009
Ordinary membership: Single $27, Family $35
Pensioner or student: Single $24, Family $29
Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

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